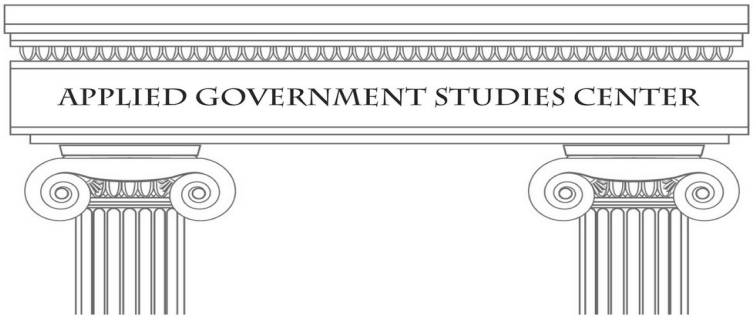

State Guard and State Defense Force Deployments, 2020–2025: A Comprehensive Analysis and Policy Recommendations

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January 2025

Published by the Applied Government Studies Center [www.agscenter.org]

Abstract

Between 2020 and 2025, State Guards and State Defense Forces (SDFs) played increasingly prominent roles in state-level emergency management and homeland security. This period was marked by overlapping crises—including a global pandemic, intensifying natural disasters, and emerging cyber threats—that placed unprecedented demands on state resources. This report examines the deployment patterns, mission evolution, and institutional significance of SDFs during this five-year period. It draws on publicly available state reports, emergency-management documentation, and open-source analyses to provide a structured assessment of SDF activities and trends, concluding with policy recommendations to strengthen future SDF capabilities.

1. Introduction

State Defense Forces are military organizations authorized under state law and recognized under federal statute (32 U.S.C. § 109). Unlike the National Guard, SDFs cannot be federalized and remain under the exclusive authority of state governors. Their missions traditionally include disaster response, logistical support, medical augmentation, and community resilience operations. From 2020 to 2025, these forces experienced heightened operational tempo as states confronted simultaneous public-health, environmental, and technological challenges.

This report analyzes major deployments and mission areas during this period, with emphasis on the COVID-19 pandemic, natural-disaster response, cyber initiatives, and joint training activities.

2. COVID-19 Pandemic Deployments (2020–2022)

2.1 Scope of Activation

The COVID-19 pandemic produced the most extensive multi-state activation of SDFs in modern history. With National Guard units frequently mobilized for federal missions, SDFs provided essential in-state capacity.

2.2 Medical and Logistical Support

Several states deployed SDF personnel to support medical surge operations. For example, the Tennessee State Guard assisted with patient-flow management, healthcare logistics, and administrative support in medical facilities. SDF units in multiple states staffed testing centers, vaccination sites, and personal protective equipment (PPE) distribution hubs.

2.3 Operational Significance

These deployments demonstrated the strategic value of SDFs as flexible, non-federalized forces capable of sustained operations during prolonged emergencies. Their contributions reduced strain on state health systems and supplemented National Guard activities.

3. Disaster Response and Humanitarian Missions (2020–2025)

3.1 Increasing Frequency of Natural Disasters

The period from 2020 to 2025 saw an increase in severe weather events, including hurricanes, flooding, and wildfires. States relied heavily on SDFs to provide manpower and logistical support during these crises.

3.2 Notable Deployments

- **South Carolina State Guard** personnel distributed potable water, supported flood-relief operations, and assisted with community recovery efforts following major storm events.
- **Georgia State Defense Force** members participated in emergency-response missions involving medical evacuation, shelter operations, and humanitarian logistics.

3.3 Institutional Impact

These missions reinforced the role of SDFs as integral components of state emergency-management frameworks. Their ability to mobilize rapidly and operate at low cost made them valuable assets during periods of resource scarcity.

4. Cybersecurity and Emerging Mission Areas (2023–2025)

4.1 Expansion into Cyber Roles

By mid-decade, several states began exploring or implementing cyber-oriented missions within their SDF structures. This shift reflected growing concerns about cyberattacks on critical infrastructure and the need for state-level resilience.

4.2 Policy Developments

A 2025 federal executive order encouraging states to strengthen local cyber preparedness indirectly elevated the importance of SDF cyber units. Discussions among SDF leadership emphasized the need for specialized training, access to technical equipment, and integration with state cybersecurity agencies.

4.3 Strategic Implications

The emergence of cyber missions signaled a transition from traditional disaster-response roles toward hybrid security functions. This evolution suggests that SDFs may become increasingly relevant in addressing non-kinetic threats.

5. Training, Readiness, and Interoperability (2020–2025)

5.1 Joint Exercises

SDFs participated in numerous training events designed to enhance readiness and interoperability with National Guard and civilian emergency-management agencies.

- **Patriot 25 (Georgia):** Georgia State Defense Force members trained alongside U.S. Air Force personnel in mass-casualty and emergency-response simulations.
- **California State Guard Training:** California State Guard personnel provided marksmanship instruction and readiness training to National Guard units, demonstrating operational integration.

5.2 Professionalization and Capability Development

These exercises contributed to:

- Improved coordination across state and federal agencies
- Enhanced disaster-response proficiency
- Increased standardization of training and operational procedures

6. Analysis of Trends (2020–2025)

6.1 Pandemic-Driven Operational Surge

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a watershed moment for SDF utilization, highlighting their capacity to support large-scale, sustained emergency operations.

6.2 Growing Reliance on SDFs for Disaster Response

As natural disasters increased in frequency and severity, states turned to SDFs to fill capability gaps in logistics, communications, and manpower.

6.3 Emergence of Cyber and Technical Missions

The expansion of cyber roles reflects broader shifts in homeland-security priorities and the need for specialized state-level capabilities.

6.4 Strengthening of Interagency Coordination

Joint training and operational integration with National Guard units improved overall state readiness and demonstrated the value of SDFs as force multipliers.

7. Policy Recommendations

The increasing operational tempo of State Guards and State Defense Forces from 2020 to 2025 highlights the need for deliberate policy development to strengthen their capabilities, clarify their missions, and ensure long-term sustainability.

7.1 Strengthen Statutory Frameworks and Mission Clarity

- Update state statutes to define mission sets, command relationships, and activation authorities.
- Explicitly authorize emerging mission areas such as cyber defense and emergency communications.
- Establish standardized criteria for activation and demobilization.

7.2 Expand Funding and Resource Allocation

- Provide dedicated budget lines for training, equipment, and administrative support.
- Develop cost-sharing models with emergency-management agencies.
- Expand federal grant eligibility for SDF-related programs.
- Authorize utilization of federally owned equipment during training and mission operations.

7.3 Enhance Training and Professionalization

- Create standardized training curricula aligned with National Guard and emergency-management standards.
- Partner with educational institutions for specialized instruction.
- Implement credentialing systems for medical, communications, and cyber roles.

7.4 Improve Inter-agency Coordination

- Formalize integration protocols between SDFs, National Guard units, and emergency-management agencies.
- Conduct regular joint exercises to test interoperability.
- Embed SDF liaison officers in emergency-operations centers during major incidents.

7.5 Develop Cyber and Technical Capabilities

- Establish dedicated cyber units within SDFs.
- Assign missions such as vulnerability assessments and incident-response support.
- Provide access to federal training resources and secure communication systems.

7.6 Promote Recruitment, Retention, and Diversity

- Implement targeted outreach to individuals with medical, technical, and emergency-response backgrounds.
- Offer incentives such as tuition assistance or professional-development credits.

7.7 Establish Evaluation and Accountability Mechanisms

- Conduct periodic assessments of readiness and mission performance.
- Standardize after-action reviews and make them publicly accessible when appropriate.
- Create independent advisory boards for oversight and strategic guidance.

8. Conclusion

From 2020 to 2025, State Guards and State Defense Forces solidified their position as essential components of state emergency-response and security infrastructures. Their contributions during the COVID-19 pandemic, natural-disaster operations, and emerging cyber missions underscore their adaptability and strategic importance. As states continue to confront complex and evolving threats, SDFs are likely to play an increasingly significant role in maintaining resilience and operational readiness.

[Research for this report was assisted by the use of Microsoft Chat]